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Political Islam: Is It a Possible Alternative for Uzbekistan?

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, political Islam is perceived as a revitalized force of modernity and as a counter-hegemonistic force. The issue, in the form of the worrisome emergence of radical Islamism, has also been present in the context of Central Asia. Around the turn of the 21st century, mainly due to 9/11, there was a boom in research dealing with this perceived problem. Uzbekistan was heavily concerned, as it is one of the three Central Asian countries, where the radical Islamist opposition has been significant. Moreover, the proximity to the war- and chaos-ridden Afghanistan also raised awareness towards the Islamist movements in the region.

There is a wide debate about whether political Islam should be perceived as a threat on the Uzbek regime and consequently to the stability of Central Asia. According to Vitaliy Naumkin[1] or Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr[2], political Islam is a worrisome problem in Uzbekistan and there is a great possibility that it may challenge the present regime, causing instability and the rise of Islamism in the whole region. On the other hand, Adeeb Khalid[3] and the analysts of the International Crisis Group[4] perceive political Islam as a force that is present in the region but is not strong enough to challenge effectively the prevailing order. In this paper I share this latter view, as I claim that even if political Islam is present in Uzbekistan, and even if the vulnerability of the Uzbek state offers a political space for it, political Islam cannot present itself as a viable alternative. The main aim of this paper is to justify this claim and to investigate into the reasons of it.

Therefore in the first part of my research I give an outline about how political Islam can appear as a political alternative and as a counter-hegemonic system, in order to make it clear

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[1] Naumkin, Vitaliy V., *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

[2] Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, *Silk Road Paper*, July 2006

[3] Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)

[4] International Crisis Group, "Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement," *Asia Report* 72 (22 December 2003)

that political Islam movements could theoretically mean a valid alternative and a great challenge for the Uzbek state. In the second part of the paper I introduce the vulnerable state of the Uzbek authoritarian regime and I analyse the role of "state-supported" Islam in the nation-building process. After that I move on to the analysis of the presence of radical movements. My aim here is to shed light on the aims of these movements to illustrate the variation of this Islamist opposition, for which I find it necessary to introduce briefly a few of the most important movements in detail. After justifying that political Islam would have the theoretical possibility to present itself as a viable political alternative in the country, in the third part of my paper I analyse the reasons of the failure of the Islamist movements to offer a real alternative to Uzbekistan.

Before moving on to the main part of my paper, it is necessary to make a conceptual clarification of what I mean under political Islam or Islamism, as I use the two concept synonymously. Political Islam is, simply put, the use of the Islam religion for reaching political ends. The main criterion for a political Islamist is to be engaged with politics on the basis of Islam.[5] Mohammed Ayoob offers a more sophisticated definition that further explains my use of the notion and allows the understanding of the key differences between Islam as a religion and Islam as a means of politics:

> "[Political Islam is] a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition."[6]

There is another necessary clarification about the terms of "moderate" and "radical" Islamism that I use many times in my paper. Political Islam is not a monolithic, universal ideology, it could rather be imagined as diverse branches built on different interpretations of Islam, ranging from groups aiming at very moderate aims and means (such as religious education or social action) to groups with radical aims (such as a global Caliphate) with violent means, even with terrorism. When I use the concept of radical Islamism, I understand movements with an aim of an Islamic political order that challenges the nation-state and seeks the unification of the *umma* with violent means.[7]

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[5] Emel Akcali, Islam and Politics in the Middle East, lecture at the Central European University, International Relations and European Studies Department, Budapest, 8. November 2011

[6] Mohammed Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 3 (Fall, 2004): 1.

[7] Emel Akcali, Islam and Politics in the Middle East, lecture at the Central European University, International Relations and European Studies Department, Budapest, 8. November 2011

Political Islam as a Possible Alternative – In General

First of all, I examine whether and how political Islam can challenge authoritarian regimes and the relation between Islamism and nationalism in Uzbekistan, in order to justify and illustrate that political Islam could be present as a viable alternative for Uzbekistan. Islamism is usually perceived as a counter-hegemonistic ideology for neoliberalism,[8] but it also offers an alternative to authoritarian political and economic regimes. Islam, namely, as many other religions, offers a complex view of the world, not only in terms of theoretical guidelines based on a set of values, but also in terms of practical duties and rights. Islamism as a counter-hegemonic movement focuses on uniting the people for a world view[9] that is based on these theoretical and practical guidelines; that can challenge prevailing regimes that do not fulfil Islamist expectations. Followers of Islam may offer a great accepting audience to this ideology, as Islam has a vast membership that is theoretically capable to induce a global mass movement based on a political ideology that draws on the complex tradition of religious belief, social norms and a kind of philosophy.[10] It may be claimed that all religions carry the same values and characteristics, and therefore would be able to challenge regimes, but the distinction has to be made of an important difference, that is, Islamism is willing to do that.

One of the most important reasons for challenging authorities is that political Islam theoretically cannot accept secularism in the sense of separating the duties of the state from religion, or the pressure on religion to delegate it exclusively into the private world. It is one of the collision points between the Uzbek regime and Islamists, as I will elaborate on it later. Islamism also claims that the social order of a state has to satisfy material and spiritual needs, and "fulfil Allah's moral vision of humankind."[11] Again, a secular state like Uzbekistan cannot satisfy spiritual needs in the Islamist sense, moreover, a vulnerable state like Uzbekistan cannot satisfy the material needs of the *umma*, which is also an Islamic duty.

Therefore in an Islamist context it is hard to find legitimization for the secular and vulnerable Uzbek state, and Islamism can present itself as a possible and valid political, economic and social solution. However, the government of the country knows very well that Islam as a symbolic legitimising force is a very powerful source of accepted authority, political power

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[8] Tony Evans, "The limits of tolerance: Islam as counter-hegemony?" *Review of International Studies* 37 (October 2011): 1751-1773.
[9] Evans, 1752.
[10] Evans, 1753.
[11] Evans, 1759.

and social discipline,[12] therefore it tries to exploit this force with using Islamic rhetoric and with expressing state influence through religious administration to be able to monitor and control religious forums that are the main sources of articulating questions about state, legitimacy, democracy or civil society.[13] This practice makes the question of the relation of Islam and nationalism also relevant in Uzbekistan. There are two contradicting approaches concerning this relationship in the literature. The followers of the first one claim that Islam and nationalism are „sister ideologies"[14] and that the relationship between state and nation mirrors the traditional relationship between the caliphate and the *umma*.[15] The followers of the other standpoint (interestingly, both Western scholars and Islamist movements[16]) say that nationalism and Islamism are contradictory ideologies that divide the Muslim community and contribute to its weaknesses.[17] As the Uzbek government follows the first standpoint and the Islamist movements in Uzbekistan hold the second one, it also contributes to the division between the state and the Islamist opposition that may strengthen Islamism as an alternative.

All in all, on the basis of the examined theoretical and practical expectations of Islamism based on traditions and interpretations of the sacred texts, and the vulnerability of the Uzbek authoritarian state in terms of both spiritual and material needs underlines and highlights the fact that Islamism could be a viable political alternative in Uzbekistan.

As I mentioned above, the vulnerability of a regime can encourage the spread and the influence of political Islam, as the political, economic and social problems of a vulnerable state can open a vast political space for the Islamist opposition. In the followings I analyze the weaknesses of the Uzbek state causing material difficulties for the population, accompanied with its ambivalent relations with Islam that could raise spiritual rejection against the secular state to illustrate that the necessary political space for influence is definitely present for political Islam.

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[12] Dietrich Jung, "Islam and Politics: A Fixed Relationship?" *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 26.
[13] Jung, 29.
[14] Elisabeth Özdalga, "Islamism and Nationalism as Sister Ideologies: Reflections on the Politicization of Islam in a Longue Durée Perspective," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 407–423.
[15] Özdalga, 408.
[16] Jung, 19.
[17] Sami Zubaida, "Islam and nationalism: continuities and contradictions," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 4 (2004): 407.

Political Islam as an Alternative – In the Uzbek Context

Islam as a culture and a religion has deep roots in the area. However, as for Islam and Islamism in Central Asia in general, and in Uzbekistan in particular, it is very important to note that in spite of being a famous, traditional centre of Islam, the region has never experienced anything resembling to a monolithic, sole "Islam" that was recognized equally in the area. Different schools and branches of Islam has always been present accompanied by various Sufi orders, or even pre-Islamic faiths such as shamanism. Other religions such as Buddhism or Christianity have also been present, and syncretism has been a widespread phenomenon[18]. This diversity is also reflected in the political Islamist movements of nowadays.

The Uzbeks has been one of the most deeply Islamic Central Asian ethnic groups with many important historical centres of Islam located in Uzbekistan as a heritage of Bukhara, Khiva, Samarkand and Kokand.[19] However, under the Soviet rule, when Islam was officially illegal due to the "state religion" of atheism, these traditional Islamic centres experienced a serious decline. The SADUM, the Soviet Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan monitored religious life closely, implementing the interests of the Soviet state. Official boards controlled local forms of religion, and religious leaders were chosen and approved by the state, strictly following the expectations of the central authority. Soviet authorities introduced a strong distinction between "good" and "bad" Islam; the former following official state guidelines and ideology, the latter posing a dangerous challenge on it.[20] As a consequence, the "state-supported" practices of Islam overwrote the diverse branches of traditional Islam in the region, imposed a monolithic view, therefore the present practices of Islam are in several cases based on crude traditions and vulgar interpretations that could survive under the Soviet role.[21] This is reflected today by the state's standpoint about religion, as I will elaborate on it later. However, before moving on to the relations between politics and religion in the state ideology, I introduce the weaknesses of the Uzbek state that explains why the government is in serious need of a legitimizing ideology such as Islam in nation-building.

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[18] Anita Sengupt, "The Making of a Religious Identity: Islam and the State in Uzbekistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 52 (1999): 3649.

[19] Yuriy Kulchik, Andrey Fadin and Victor Sergeev, *Central Asia after the Empire* (London, Chicago: Pluto Press, 1996) 5.

[20] Matteo Fumagalli, "Islamic Radicalism and the Insecurity Dilemma in Central Asia: The Role of Russia," in: *Russia and Islam*, eds. Roland Dannreuther and Luke March (New York: Routledge, 2010), 195.

[21] Kulchik, 5.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Uzbek state experienced several political, social and economic problems, most of which are still present even after twenty-five years independence. The political scene did not change much after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The leader of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, maintained his leading position as the president of the country. He established (or maintained) an authoritarian regime that bans opposition, has complete control over the media and commands a feared security agency. Karimov established his own party, the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan that has the same structure and membership as in Soviet times. The parliament has only symbolic significance; it virtually functions as a rubber stamp. The political leadership of Uzbekistan is built on kin-based networks and is very far from representing or even considering the interests of the majority of the population, and it is also very far from the Islamic ideal state.[22]

The authoritarian system of Karimov has not been doing better on terms of economy than on politics either. The president still refuses economic restructuring and privatization.[23] Problems of agriculture can be led back to the cotton monoculture that was implemented by the Soviets from the 1930s. The inefficient methods of irrigation are expanded well beyond the capacity of Central Asian rivers, the soil is exhausted by the monoculture and full with harmful fertilizers causing economical problems. Moreover, the cotton industry is built on cheap labour, and the prices on the world market are also low, so it is not a profitable industry either to the state or to the population.[24] The withering of the Soviet branches of hard industry and the lack of foreign investment further contributed to the poor economic situation and the high unemployment in the country. Although nowadays the Uzbek economy is growing with big steps, it is mainly due to the energy industry, and the initial situation of the country and the structural problems of the economy still do not enable this newly-gained wealth to leak down to the poor rural majority.[25]

On this political and economic basis, no wonder that the social situation in the country is also poor. Although the government tries to manipulate the data, it is clear that there is a high demographic pressure, a high unemployment rate, and more than one quarter of the society

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[22] Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002), 80-81.
[23] Rashid, 81.
[24] Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000): 235.
[25] CIA: The World Factbook, 2012. Uzbekistan (accessed April 10, 2012) https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html

lives in poverty.[26] Inequalities are also high, and human rights records are "appalling", according to the Human Rights Watch: "Torture remains endemic in the criminal justice system. Authorities continue to target civil society activists, opposition members, and journalists, and to persecute religious believers who worship outside strict state controls."[27]

On the top of all these, the declared multivectoral foreign policy of the state has led to capriciously changing international relations in practice.[28] Facing these problems, the Uzbek state has difficulties with building legitimacy. The main means that Karimov decided to use are Islam, nation-building and the strict maintenance of order.

On the basis of the above-mentioned facts, particularly on the records of human rights, the use of the "strict maintenance of order" as a legitimising force does not need a further interpretation. I should only emphasize here that although the methods of Karimov to maintain order are violent and would be unacceptable in a democratic state, they can fulfil their aims, as Uzbekistan is still one of the dominant states in the region and so far managed to avoid chaos – that is, in comparison with the neighbouring Afghanistan or Kyrgyzstan, a considerable achievement.

As for religion, Karimov maintains the Soviet-inspired structures, and keeps Islam under strict state control. It is important to note that Uzbekistan is a secular country according to its constitution as well, which also secures the freedom of religion theoretically. In 1998, the president issued the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations that *pro forma* also guarantees religious freedom, but in fact puts a great pressure on Islamists and also common believers, as it illegalized unregistered religious groups, activities or private religious education, and imposed state censorship on religious materials coming from other countries.[29]

This approach is characteristics to the Uzbek regime that also maintains the distinction between "good" and "bad" Islam, putting all oppositional Islamist initiatives under the latter label, but emphasizing the hardly justified fact that it respects the rules of Islam in order to strengthen nation-building initiatives. However, this "state-supported" Islam is a political construction of the old-new elites that intend to build their nation-state and legitimacy with the help of the traditional roots of Islam in the region. This construction even resembles to the Western ideas of "monolithic" political Islam, ignores the true traditions of the Uzbeks while

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[26] CIA: The World Factbook, 2012. Uzbekistan (accessed April 10, 2012) https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html

[27] Human Rights Watch. World Report: Country Summary, Uzbekistan. January 2012. (accessed April 10, 2012). http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-uzbekistan

[28] Rashid, 83.

[29] Fumagalli, 195.

claiming to contribute to the revival of Islam after the Soviet oppression and making it a part of the secular state officially.[30]

However, the relationship between Islam and nation-building is still controversial and debated in Uzbekistan, and the ambivalent approach of the state maintains this controversy and contributes to the strengthening of the Islamist opposition.[31] Moreover, as the problems due to the state's vulnerability still prevail in spite of the either symbolic or violent intentions to strengthen it, and as the continuous waves of Islam revival since the 1980s are deeply embedded in the society, the population is urged to use the language of Islam to articulate their grievances, needs and demands.[32]

All in all, the Uzbek state is a typical authoritarian regime, carrying its characteristic problems. Such regimes namely suppress opposition in its core, act against the Islamic ideas, but are looking for legitimization through Islam, nation-building and "order" (that is in most cases violence). A regime like this can easily deserve the label of *Jahiliya* and offer space for Islamist movements to act. In the followings I outline how Islamist movements have tried to challenge the authoritarian order of the Karimov regime.

A few words about the Islamist opposition

Under the above-described circumstances, the Islamist opposition had to meet the same destiny, or even a more violent one, as other oppositions. By 1992, Karimov managed to oppress democratic opposition and he continued the elimination of opposition with Islamist groups, the location of which was mainly the Ferghana valley. There were constant raids in 1992, 1993, 1997, 1999, which were followed by many arrests, waves of closed mosques and medreses, and several jailed or exiled mullahs.[33] It was not surprising that the *Islamic Renaissance Party* (IRP) that was founded in the Soviet Union and had branches in all Central Asian republics could not step up as a legal political party,[34] and that the Islamist opposition was treated with violent means. They were securitized, treated as radicals regardless of their positions, and they were excluded from legal possibilities of organization, comprising

[30] Sengupt, 3649
[31] Anita Sengupta, The Formation of the Uzbek Nation-State: A Study in Transition (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 198.
[32] Kulchik, 6.
[33] Rashid, 84.
[34] Rashid, 84-85.

moderate Islamist people as well. There is a clear connection between the emerging radicals and the oppression of the authoritative regime.[35]

The rise of radical movements has begun in 1991, when small informal groups such as *Adolat* (Justice) and *Islam Lashkarlari* (Soldiers of Islam) emerged. These groups stepped up in a violent way and took control over Namangan and Marghilan, claiming the introduction of sharia law and the restructuring of Uzbekistan into an Islamic state. Karimov's retaliation was even more violent. It was this time when he banned the activity of all kinds of opposition groups, and many people were arrested, jailed or sent into exile.[36] Since then, Islamic insurgence comes in waves to Uzbekistan, followed with crackdowns.[37]

Nonetheless, the Islamist movements are from a very wide range in terms of ideology, as it could be expected on the basis of traditional Islam in the region as well. Although the government tries to interpret them as one monolithic and radical movement, the range of Islamists goes from moderate organizations (such as the Sufis or the initiative to establish the Islamic Renaissance Party) to the very radical, even jihadist movements (such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), and from strictly domestic organizations (such as *Akromiya*) to transnational networks (such as the *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami*). To illustrate that, on one hand, Islamist opposition has a presence in Uzbekistan in spite of the government's initiatives to eliminate them, and on the other hand, how diverse the nature of these movements is, in the followings I introduce the most well-known movements in details.

Going from non-violent, transnational organizations towards violent and domestic movements, the first organization that I should mention is the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Islamic Party of Liberation). This organization is active in over 40 countries, with an ideological centre in London and an official headquarters in London. Its main aim is to unify the *umma*, recreate the Caliphate and extend it to the whole world. It also claims to be non-violent and refuses all cooperation with terrorist organizations. Nonetheless, it fundamentally rejects liberal democracy and combines Marxist-Leninist ideology with Islamism.[38] The *Hizb ut-Tahrir* mainly concentrates on the ideological fight. Departing from the identity crisis of the post-Soviet Central Asia and the crude version of Islam that prevails there, the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* can benefit in this region as a radical and unorthodox movement. As it also conducts social duties,

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[35] Rashid, 85.
[36] Fumagalli, 197.
[37] Fumagalli, 191.
[38] Zeyno, Baran, S. Frederick Starr, and Svante E. Cornell, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, *Silk Road Paper*, July 2006, 19-20.

the economic situation contributes to its popularity as well.[39] The organization is perceived to be the strongest in Uzbekistan in the region, with estimates there about 7,000 up to 60,000 members.[40]

However, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is a global organization, having less information and interest in Uzbekistan, than the domestic opposition has. It is common that a member of the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* establishes a new, domestic organization, such as *Akromiya* (derived from the name of the leader, Akram Yuldashev) and *Hizb un-Nusrat* (Party of Victory).

The *Akromiya* also fights for the Caliphate, but in the multistage process that leads there, it presumes that the first step is to gain influence over state authorities. To gain more support to this, it promotes a crude version of Islam, and does not build on a complex theoretical background, rather on a popular, "cult-like" one. The organisation also has the aim to provide socio-economic opportunities, such as establishing small businesses that employ young people who are also required to study Islam, and that share their profits with funds that support the poor. It is a rare successful example of bottom-up Islamic movements. [41]

The *Hizb un-Nusrat* is not open to the public, the background of the recruits are beforehand investigated. This group mainly consists of people who have previously been suspected of taking part in the Islamist opposition. The aims and means are similar to the original organization, the *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.[42]

Maybe one of the most well-known violent terrorist groups of the world is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that was also mentioned in the famous speech of George Bush after 9/11.[43] The IMU is a domestic jihadist organization that does not only propagate the use of violent means but also uses them to reach their aims. Namely, the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan with a religious system and government, which would be declaredly built on different foundations as other Islamic states such as Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.[44] They have never cooperated with the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* because of the different understandings of aims and means. The IMU was responsible for many violent actions, but, as the weakening of its main supporter, the *al-Qaeda*, and as the situation in Afghanistan

[39] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 22.
[40] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 24.
[41] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 24-25.
[42] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 25.
[43] Khalid, 156.
[44] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 27.

changes, the organization has been significantly weakened. The estimated number of IMU fighters is nowadays only 150.[45]

All in all, the introduced movements are very diverse in its activities, aims and means. They build on different transnational networks, deny cooperation with each other, and cannot be suspected with being part of a radical monolithic global Islamist movement, as the Uzbek government claims. They try to exploit the dissatisfaction with the government, with the religious administration and the socio-economic situation, and to channel this discontent into an Islamic revolution. But however good opportunities they may get in the context of the vulnerable and violent Uzbek state, and however similar their aims might be, the diversity and the wide range of these movements and organizations prevents the unification of oppositional forces and the dissatisfied population.[46]

After the outline of the main Islamist movements, it can clearly be stated that Islamist opposition is present in Uzbekistan, and that it could have been developed to a serious counter-hegemonic force. However, the number and the diverse aims of the movements also illustrate one reason why they failed to step up as a serious challenge to Karimov's regime.

The Reasons of the Failure of Islamism As an Alternative in Uzbekistan

However, not only the fractured opposition is responsible for the failure of Islamism as a political alternative in Uzbekistan. During my research I found many other reasons that could all contribute to the failure of Islamism as an alternative in Uzbekistan.

I wrote extensively on the characteristics of the authoritarian regime of Uzbekistan and its approach towards religion. The main conclusions were that although the state is interested in using Islam as a building block of the nation and as a legitimizing force for the government, it is much more interested in maintaining order and peace in the country, as it is the sole functioning legitimization of the Karimov government. "Bad" Islam and Islamism therefore are reinforced as state enemies and are oppressed violently. The state blocks all initiatives to establish Islamist organizations, let alone a legal Islamic party, that pushes the initiators towards radicalism that could be silenced more easily by the state. The consequent de-Islamized, neutralized public debates[47] and the prevailing "state-supported" Islam accompanied with the oppression and exclusion of the Islamist opposition closes the space that the shortcomings of politics, economics and social issues have opened for the Islamic

[45] Baran-Starr-Cornell, 27.
[46] Khalid, 164.
[47] Fumagalli, 195.

alternative, the authoritative state has several interests to prevent the spread of this counter-hegemonistic ideology with all means at its disposal.

However, the domestic oppression would not be sufficient without the active and/or passive support for the authoritative state from two very significant actors: the West and the Uzbek population itself. After the successful securitization of the so-called radical Islamist movement of Uzbekistan (that is misleading at least in two ways: it puts illegalized moderate Islamists under the label radical as well, and it treats these diverse and fragmented groups as one unified movement in strong connection with transnational Islamist networks such as *al-Qaeda*), and after 9/11 and the Afghan war, Western powers accepted this imagined movement as an open threat that could easily destabilize the already instable region.[48] The discourse grounded by the Uzbek government fitted into the global discourse about global Islamist movements and the consequent Islamophobia also helped the acceptance of the threat. The assumption that radical Islamism is the only potent power that can replace authoritarianism also plays a role in rejecting the Islamist opposition.[49] Therefore the West decided to support the authoritative government and turn their eyes away from the serious lack of democracy and violations of human rights in the region. Ironically, the Western support to the government of Karimov prolongs the authoritarian regime and not only enables it to maintain the oppression of the opposition, but also contributes to the elimination of any voices that would dare to challenge state authority even in the name of Western values.

The behaviour of the population does not make the situation of the Islamic opposition easier. Although the vast majority of the population follows Islam as a religion,[50] the society is thoroughly secularized and follows a crude version of diverse Islamic traditions with the strict control of the state that could survive the Soviet rule and the authoritative governance of Karimov. They are not interested either in the introduction of Sharia law or in the establishment of an Islamic state.[51] The traditional Central Asian rural community uses Islam in two ways for political ends explicitly. On one hand, it claims the primate of community interests over individual interests; on the other hand, the merge of spiritual and secular authorities would also be desirable for the population.[52] However, these aims are perceived to be more or less fulfilled by the present authorities who use the rhetoric of Islam, and if not,

[48] Fumagalli, 197.
[49] Bassam Tibi, "Islamism and Democracy: On the Compatibility of Institutional Islamism and the Political Culture of Democracy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 2 (2009): 139.
[50] CIA: The World Factbook, 2012. Uzbekistan (accessed 10. April 2012) https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html
[51] Fumagalli,195.

[52] Kulchik, 6.

the society does not have the interest and the power to fight. While the main concern of the majority of the population is mere survival, the political life in Uzbekistan is marred by apathy; the civil society is virtually non-existent, under-funded and subject to political suspicion.[53]

Another, further-reaching problem concerning the society is that challenging the present structures would challenge Uzbek identity itself. Although the Uzbek ethnic group has long historical traditions and even a glorious past, the Uzbek nation was founded in the present frameworks. The borders, the language, the script, the structure of the society, even the sense of belonging to the same nation are the heritage of the Soviet framework that is now maintained by the authoritarian regime. Questioning the framework would question the mere being of Uzbekistan.[54]

Conclusions

At the beginning of my research I analysed the theoretical grounds of political Islam to emphasize how it could mean a challenge for authoritarian regimes such as Uzbekistan. After that I also analysed the context and the main domestic organizations of Uzbek Islamist oppositional movements, in order to highlight that they could represent a serious power in the country. However, this outline also illustrated that the different aims and visions, and the fragmentation of these movements reduce their power, and in the next section I also found out that there are many other reasons that weaken this Islamist opposition. On the basis of these, I can draw the conclusion that even if the Uzbek Islamist opposition disposes over a significant power, it cannot step up as a successful alternative to the authoritarian regime of Karimov; because of its fragmentation, the successful oppression of the government and the lack of significant internal and external support. Moreover, a regime change in this post-Soviet republic would re-raise the questions of identity construction and belonging, and may have consequences on the bordering republics as well. All in all, the Islamist opposition in Uzbekistan has to face too many obstacles to be able to present a viable alternative in the present circumstances.

However, as every researcher who deal with Central Asia, at the end I also have to emphasize that data coming from this region suffers from many shortcomings and vagueness, and as my topic here is one that is especially difficult to investigate because of the nature of the

[53] Summary of the Workshop on "The OSCE and Political Islam: The Case of Central Asia," Hamburg, 22 – 23 September 2001, http://www.osce.org/secretariat/16199 (accessed April 10, 2012)
[54] Soucek, 258-259.

authoritarian regime, it cannot be clearly and unambiguously stated that political Islam is failed as a viable alternative in Uzbekistan. Moreover, if even one of the listed reasons for failure changes, then, as these factors are closely interrelated, the whole situation could change. Therefore we cannot conclude that the Islamic opposition is powerless and not significant in Uzbekistan anymore. The conclusion rather could be that the investigation of the listed reasons is of core importance, because the related phenomena may have serious influence on the future of Uzbekistan and of broader Central Asia.

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